

Text from the Tradition: Awakening by Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (text drawn from pp. 14-15, 19, 20-21, 43-44)

Awakening beyond Life to Awaken in Life

Spiritual awakening is shifting from one perspective to another, until we finally glimpse meaningfulness where our mind could not perceive it before...In this moment of revelation, it is as if the light of intelligence has enhanced the very aura surrounding our bodies. Just as when we grasp something that we've never understood before—suddenly there is a smile, an outburst of energy, and a breakthrough of light. One's whole being burns with a brighter flame because of the intensity of awareness—as if the luminosity of our awareness has sparked the very cells of our body. Indeed, awakening triggers off illumination; it is always connected to light. But it isn't an intellectual process; it has to do with the radiance of luminous thoughts—a kind of clarity that overcomes ambiguity because light highlights things and makes everything clear.

It is our encounter with this “other reality” that catalyzes a dramatic shift in perspective, widening the lens of our individual psyches and revealing the immense scope of the Divine point of view...In meditation, for instance, we may experience an altered notion of space—both being everywhere and in one place—that corresponds to quantum theories of non-locality in space. Time, as well, may shift from being linear and one-dimensional to a multi-tiered dimension influenced by what scientists describe as acausal and non-determined factors.

From these dramatic shifts in vantage point of space and time, it is possible to glimpse clues into the workings of the Cosmos. For...we are a continuum of consciousness ranging from the boundless, transpersonal dimension that is coextensive with all others to the “discrete entity” that makes up our unique individuality. Learning to embrace these two ends of the continuum is the spiritual task of awakening and illumination—reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable vantage points between the Divine and individual points of view.

Glorifying and exalting God's attributes through our prayers and concentrations arouses those very qualities in ourselves...Thus, in meditation we not only discover the reality of the universe behind all existence but also as it is reflected in ourselves. Discovering the universe manifested within us allows us to accept the beauty of our being as we never could have done before, releasing [latent potentialities.]

Thus, I want to reiterate that the process I'm elaborating here...is a twofold one: awakening beyond life must occur before we can awaken in life...What this means is that one sometimes has to call a halt to daily life, either through a disciplined regimen of daily meditations, or, if possible, by going on a retreat. It's as if we must take a break from the demands of everyday life in order to awaken a part of ourselves that has been asleep. Then when we return to life, the task is to try to remain awake. For when a person re-enters life after a period of meditation or long retreat, that person has gained a certain protection against the onslaught of circumstances and is able to maintain a transcendent overview even in the middle of the gravity that drags people back down into commonplace ways of thinking...A mystic can be spiritually awake even in the midst of the worst suffering and tragedies of life.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Too often, conventional interpretations of spiritual teaching lull us into a sleepy, lazy state of being. Rather than inspiring us to take on the task of staying spiritually awake amidst the muck and mess of life, we are often allowed to sit back and wait it out, often encouraged to assent to a one-time statement of blind belief or painful repentance. Then, if faith holds out, we might be lucky enough to see what is on the “other side” after our life-breath has expired. Why wait until we are dead? The kingdom is already here.

Teachings on awakening, whether from the Sufi or Christian contemplative lineages, encourage us to stay active, to keep awake, to distrust the sensation of ultimate separation that often seeps into our awareness as we plow through the difficulties and strife of daily life. In order to fend off this illusory sense of separation, and the corollary effect of desperation, we must desire to see reality as it really is, we must commit to a discipline that will train our sight and our heart to perceive Wholeness even as we wade through a seeming garbage heap of fragmented pieces.

Inayat Khan names this disciplined spiritual training as learning to shift between the two perspectives of Divine and personal vision. Thomas Kelly describes the process as oscillations between “alternation” and “simultaneity.” Evelyn Underhill points to the two-ness of human experience and describes the mystic training as the “art of union with the flux and the art of union with the Whole.” Within each of these frameworks, we are presented with a choice: we can remain asleep and trudge through the drudgery of daily life with a narrow heart and vision of the world, imprisoned by the walls of a single perspective, or we can awaken and face the suffering of human experience with an expansive heart and wide-eyed vision of the world, impelled by the dazzling array of endless perspective and possibility. Just because life is hard does not mean it must be devoid of the Presence of the Spirit. Truly, the hard work of our spiritual discipline of staying awake counts just as much on the sitting pillow as with the impatient child tugging at our hand for attention. When confronted by the bleak black-and-white choice of either-or, we can opt for the life-giving both-and. Therefore, we can find illumination on the sitting pillow or while sitting on the bus-ride coming home from work. Both settings beckon us to stay awake beyond life as well as within life.

Questions for Reflection:

- In general, what do you notice in your mind, heart, and senses from the text and teaching?
- What attribute do you admire in God, or in others, that might be a call of awakening for you?
- What does “retreating from daily life” look like for you? Daily practice, days-at-a-time away? Hourly?